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U.S. offers the prospect of asylum

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan and key members of Congress held out the promise of asylum in the United States for Ferdinand E. Marcos yesterday as a means of persuading him to relinquish the Philippine presidency and leave peacefully.

Presidential spokesman Larry Speakes read a statement approved by President Reagan before dawn yesterday urging Marcos to step down to permit "a peaceful transition to a new government."

Speakes described the administration as "watching and waiting" for developments. He left no doubt that the United States would harbor Marcos if he decided to leave the country, and would offer him a military plane to come here.

On Capitol Hill, House and Senate members generally concurred that the United States should offer its longtime ally asylum should he request it, but many members said the offer should be contingent on Marcos' prompt, peaceful departure.

"If he leaves with a lot of bloodshed, he's not going to be welcome under any circumstances," said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, the ranking Democrat on the Senate intelligence committee, as he emerged from an afternoon briefing of House and Senate leaders by Secretary of State George P. Shultz and the special presidential envoy to the Philippines, Philip C. Habib.

"A solution to this crisis can only be achieved through a peaceful transition to a new government," the White House statement said. "Attempts to prolong the life of the present regime by violence are futile."

Speakes said that Reagan had not spoken with Marcos to ask him to step down but that "the President's sentiments, however, have been reported directly to President Marcos" through diplomats.

Reagan was sending Habib, who just returned from a 10-day mission to Manila, back to the embattled nation last night.

No offer of asylum had been made and none requested, Speakes said, but he made it clear that the administration would not abandon its longtime friend and that a military plane was available to transport him.

"Let me underscore again that we have expressed our willingness to be of assistance to an old friend and ally, should he make a decision in any fashion," Speakes said. "And the reports of a plane designated or standing by, certainly we have adequate capacity at Clark Air Force Base" in the Philippines.

Reversing a statement made Friday that the administration would send a representative to Marcos' inauguration, Speakes said yesterday that the swearing-in scheduled for today in the Philippines was to be "a private affair" with no U.S. representation.

Military rebels operating from a barricaded stronghold in the Manila suburbs have proclaimed Marcos' opponent, Corazon C. Aquino, president, and she also planned an inauguration today as head of a provisional government.

Speakes said the United States had played no role as go-between or broker between the Marcos and Aquino camps, "none that I'm aware of."

There was a bipartisan consensus among congressional leaders that Marcos should step down, but most of them couched their remarks in cautious terms, mindful of the volatile situation in the Philippines.

"Our counsel has been he [Marcos] ought not to cause bloodshed. We're trying to make the point he cannot offer viable leadership. ... It is a delicate situation of negotiations," said Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R., Ind.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who headed a congressional delegation to monitor the Feb. 7 presidential election, which led to the current crisis there. He returned with reports of widespread fraud by Marcos loyalists.

On the question of asylum for Marcos, whose family is reported to have extensive real estate holdings in the United States, Democrats and Republicans concurred that it should be granted contingent on his peaceful departure.

The White House statement yesterday had cited "disturbing reports of possible attack by forces loyal to Gen. [Fabian C.] Ver against elements of Philippine forces that have come to the support" of Aquino. Ver is Marcos' chief of the armed forces.

Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole (R., Kan.) and Minority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D., W. Va.) said asylum should be linked to a peaceful departure by Marcos.

The chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, Sen. Dave Durenberger (R., Minn.), said he was "not sure" that if Marcos stepped down, he would necessarily need to leave his homeland. "There's not a whole generation of hatred" that would make it impossible for an ex-President Marcos to live safely in the Philippines, provided he had a bodyguard, Durenberger said.

Speakes, noting that the Philippine people had affection for Americans, said there were about 190,000 American citizens in the Philippines and that none appeared endangered by the developments there. Speakes added that the two large U.S. military installations in the Philippines, Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base, were operating under "standard procedures" and had not been placed on alert.

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